



THE MAUREEN AND MIKE MANSFIELD FOUNDATION

Testimony of

L. Gordon Flake

**Executive Director,
The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation**

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I. Introduction

Mike Mansfield is known in these halls as a former Congressman, our nation's longest serving Senate Majority Leader, and our longest serving Ambassador to Japan. What is less well known is that while a student at the University of Montana in 1934 he wrote his Master's thesis on "American Diplomatic Relations with Korea." In what was one of a select few studies of a country at the time still under Japanese colonial rule, Mansfield examined the period from 1866 to 1910. Addressing the United States' willingness to turn a blind eye to Japan's annexation of Korea, he concluded "we had no imperialistic designs in Korea; we had no class clamoring for a commercial or political foothold; we had no real and vital interests in the country; therefore, the treaty of 1882 notwithstanding, we had no business there. Thus, we departed and left Korea to her fate."

A full century after Mansfield drew his conclusions, our interests in Korea could not be more different. South Korea is by some accounts the twelfth largest economy in the world, the United States' seventh largest trading partner, home to nearly 100,000 U.S. citizens, and the recipient of billions of dollars in U.S. investment. Treaty allies for over 50 years, the U.S. and Korea have fought and shed blood together, not only on the Korean Peninsula, but also in Vietnam and the Middle East. Significantly, Korea now has the third largest contingent of troops in Iraq after the U.S. and Britain.

And yet, despite this illustrious history and such a plethora of shared interests, just a few years after officials celebrating the 50th anniversary of the alliance proclaimed the alliance solid for the next fifty years, there are some who question whether the alliance will last until the end of the decade. Official reassurances and genuine tactical cooperation between our two governments aside, the political relationship appears to be fractured and there is now deep and growing concern in both Seoul and Washington about the state and the direction of the alliance.

II. Trial Separation or Friendly Divorce?

While strong, our alliance relationship has never been smooth. Testy relations with past military dictators—"Koreagate" in the 1970s, sharp trade disputes in the 1980s, and differing approaches to North Korea—have all strained relations in the past. Stanford University scholar Dan Sneider recently wrote an article in the *Washington Post* reminding us of past woes in the alliance and urging a more measured view of current difficulties.¹ While useful, this more realistic view of the past ignores some fundamental differences from past and current tensions. Perhaps most importantly, current challenges are taking place in a post 9-11 environment and without the safety net of the Cold War structures that underpinned much of U.S. interests on the Peninsula.

The past several years have seen a litany of events that have raised questions about the state of the alliance, each meriting close attention. However, this testimony will focus

¹ Sneider, Daniel, "The U.S.-Korea Tie: Myth and Reality" *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, September 12, 2006; Page A23

primarily on the recent, very public debate over the transfer of wartime operational control since this is an issue that appears to strike at the very nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

This is not a new issue and has been the subject of quiet working-level discussions and negotiations for quite sometime. In principle, the transfer of wartime operational control to Korea is a logical and laudable goal. However, the issue entered the political arena this summer when the Roh administration cast this issue as “taking back” such control from the Americans and publicly pushed for a transfer date of 2012 by which few military analysts think Korea can be ready, particularly given currently budgeted levels of spending in Seoul. The real surprise came when the U.S. apparently counter-proposed with an even earlier date of 2009, leading many to question U.S. motives. One hopeful explanation for the U.S. acceleration was that the U.S. had given up on the Roh administration as a negotiating partner on this issue and decided to take its case directly to the Korean public, fomenting a debate that has already seen 16 former defense ministers and numerous others in Seoul call for a reconsideration of the issue. Unfortunately, that does not appear to accurately reflect U.S. intentions.

A more alarming interpretation of U.S. intent in advancing such an aggressive counter proposal is sufficient, despite official assurances to the contrary, to raise concern regarding declining U.S. support for the alliance. The original Korean proposal for the transfer of control has been described as “pushing on an open door” with the U.S. already having decided that it wanted to enact the transfer and now seeking to carry it out as soon as possible. There is ample evidence that the top-level civilian leadership in the Pentagon primarily views Korea in the context of our Global Posture Review (GPR.) In this broad context it is not surprising that we would seek to free ourselves a 1950s-era posture that continues to tie down significant numbers of U.S. forces in a time of worldwide shortages. Add to this the declining threat perceptions of North Korea, at least as articulated by our South Korea allies, resistance towards the strategic flexibility that the U.S. wants for its troops in the region, and the political difficulties surrounding base redeployment, and you have a leadership in the U.S. that is inclined to give Korea “what it wants.” What is frightening, however, is how much the situation today echoes the situation in the Philippines in 1992 when the U.S. withdrew so precipitously, albeit encouraged by a volcano.

In and of themselves, the transfer of wartime operational control and even the redeployment and reduction of U.S. troop levels on the peninsula do not necessary speak of declining commitment to the alliance. Military officials are correct to point out that we should focus on capability, which may in fact be enhanced, rather than structure or numbers. However, if enacted as envisioned, particularly in the current political environment, it is easy to see the transfer of wartime operation control as tantamount to a divorce. The current joint command in Korea represents the only truly “joint” force in the world. The clear delineation of roles and reduced exposure to the increasingly suspect political will in Seoul for a potential conflagration that seems to be the objective in the U.S. support for transfer of wartime operation control would suggest at best a trial separation if not an amicable divorce. True, both the U.S. and the ROK proclaim

unwavering support for the alliance and for the defense of the peninsula, but this support seems to be the equivalent of the assurances of separating parents that they are still “friends” and that they will still work together for the good of the child. The inevitable outcome appears to lay the groundwork for a much reduced U.S. presence on the Peninsula and, capabilities aside, a downgrade in the political perception of the alliance. In the end, as with the case with many divorces, this change may be for best, but it remains sad.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this process is only being driven by the civilian leadership of the Defense Department. Traditionally the bastion of support for the U.S.-ROK alliance, the defense establishment both in Washington and in Korea now arguably gives Capitol Hill a run for its money as being the leading skeptic, if not detractor, of the alliance, at least in the context of current leadership in Seoul. Sensitive issues, such as anti-American incidents, the vilification of the USFK in blockbuster movies, and questions about environmental standards and basing, have all taken their toll. However, the most influential factors on U.S. military perceptions have likely been related to questions of preparedness. The last-minute withdrawal of South Korean support for joint Operations Plan 5029 left U.S. planners feeling exposed. In addition, the question of bombing ranges and whether the U.S. will have to travel to Alaska or Thailand to train appears to have been solved only by an unprecedented threat to withdraw the U.S. Air Force from Korea. Coupled with base relocation issues and the growing difficulty of coordinating plans and policies regarding North Korea (a nation the ROK Ministry of Defense no longer designates as its primary enemy), and of course the question of wartime operational control, these issues combine to challenge longstanding military support.

III. Underlying Causes of the Crisis

Rather than continue to catalog the many indications of tensions and try to assign blame for individual statements, incidents, and misunderstandings between the U.S. and South Korea, it may be more helpful to explore some of the underlying trends that now pose a challenge to our political relationship and thus to our alliance.

•Diverging Threat Perceptions of North Korea

Even while framed by the broader Cold War, the foundation of the U.S.-ROK alliance has always been a common threat perception of North Korea. Given the current divergence in U.S. and ROK perspectives on the North, it is useful to recall that the first such divide emerged when the Clinton administration began actively engaging North Korea as part of its efforts to address the crisis surrounding the North Korean nuclear program. In almost a mirror image to the situation today, when the U.S. and the DPRK reached the Geneva Agreed Framework in October of 1994, it was South Korea that remained deeply suspicious of North Korean intentions and attempted to check what the ROK perceived to be an overly forward U.S. approach to the North.

The election of Korea’s first opposition candidate, Kim Dae-Jung, in 1997 solidified South Korea’s dramatic transition to democracy, and brought U.S. and ROK approaches

to the North into close parallel. In his inaugural address in early 1998 President Kim Dae Jung declared his objective of “peaceful co-existence” with the North and outlined the policy of engagement that would become the hallmark of his administration. While there remained serious challenges, such as a North Korean missile test and the discovery of what was thought to be an underground nuclear facility at Kumchangri, the approaches of the Kim and Clinton administrations remained in close sync, and following the historic North-South Summit of June 2000, the Clinton administration continued its efforts to reach some type of reconciliation with the North.

The election of President Bush in late 2000 brought about a fundamental shift in the U.S. approach to North Korea, a development that from the very start affected U.S.-ROK relations. Eager to secure U.S. support for his policy of engaging the North and in particular for his plans for a hoped-for follow-up summit with Kim Jong Il, President Kim Dae Jung pushed for and received an early meeting with President Bush. Unfortunately, when the summit was held in March of 2001, President Bush’s key Asia policy advisors had not yet been confirmed and were not in place. In fact, given how politicized the issue of North Korea policy had become in the waning days of the Clinton administration, with efforts to arrange a visit for President Clinton to Pyongyang, Secretary Albright declaring what some saw as a premature declaration of victory on the missile issue, and a pivotal op-ed in the *New York Times*² the very morning of the summit calling for the Bush administration to continue the “Clinton” approach, it is not surprising that the initial Bush administration reaction was also seen to be political in nature, with even Secretary of State Colin Powell backing away from his assertion made just a day earlier that the new administration would follow its predecessor’s approach on missiles. Regardless of the justification, while other aspects of the summit went well, President Bush’s expression of his distrust for Kim Jong Il and his declared intent to conduct a review of U.S. policy towards the North, rather than provide a blanket endorsement of an engagement policy toward the North, disappointed President Kim Dae Jung and marked what many analysts see as an important turning point in U.S.-ROK relations.

The divergence marked by that first Bush-Kim meeting was only accelerated by the fateful events of September 11, 2001. Not only did these events fundamentally alter the U.S. worldview, but in a declared “War on Terror,” North Korea was still on the list of state sponsors of terror. In an era of growing concern about weapons of mass destruction, North Korea was a prime candidate for suspicion, and by President Bush’s January 2002 State of the Union speech, North Korea had been branded a member of the “Axis of Evil.” At the same time, President Kim Dae Jung continued to push forward with his “sunshine policy” of engaging North Korea. The decision of South Korea to de-emphasize the security threat from North Korea and emphasize the positive aspects of growing North-South interaction contributed to a rapid divergence of relative threat perceptions as seen by Washington and Seoul.

² “Talking to the North Koreans” by Wendy R. Sherman, *New York Times*, Editorial Desk, March 7, 2001, Section A, Page 19.

This trend has continued as the Roh Mu Hyun administration has doggedly maintained the basic approach of engaging North Korea, despite such seminal events as North Korea's withdrawal from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, declaration of its status as a nuclear weapons state, intransigence in the six party talks and most recently, test firing multiple missiles. While the U.S. response itself has been admittedly heavy on rhetoric and light on action, the respective characterization of each of these events has served to highlight the growing divide between Seoul and Washington to the point where in response to North Korea's July missile test, South Korea openly opposed the Japanese- and U.S.- backed sanctions resolution at the United Nations and openly announced their support for a much milder Chinese and Russian response that even the Chinese and Russians would ultimately abandon.

•Diverging Perceptions of the Asymmetry in the Relationship

A similar diverging trend has to do with perceptions of the relative importance of the Korean Peninsula to the United States. A fundamental role of the alliance itself over the past five decades has been to address and reassure South-Korean insecurities. Koreans are acutely aware of the 1905 Taft-Katsura Agreement by which Koreans saw themselves as being abandoned to Japan and the infamous Acheson line which excluded Korea from the United States' area of strategic interest and thus was a factor in the North Korean invasion that started the Korean war. In response, the U.S.-ROK security alliance itself, the presence of significant numbers of U.S. troops on the Peninsula, and even the forward positioning of those troops in the presumed North Korean invasion corridor to serve as a "tripwire" which would guarantee a U.S. involvement in any conflagration can all be viewed as, in addition to their fundamental deterrent properties, intended to reassure our South Korean allies.

With the miraculous success of their economy, joining the OECD, growing international prominence, and the end of any real competition with North Korea, South Korean confidence has naturally and appropriately risen. This newfound confidence became a factor in 2002 when President Roh Mu Hyun, supported primarily by a younger generation for whom the defining event was not the Korean War but the 1980 Kwangju Incident, rose to power on a wave of anti-Americanism provoked by the unfortunate death of two schoolgirls in a U.S. military accident. The "386"³ generation embodied by the Roh administration understandably demanded a more "equal" relationship with the United States. This demand was based not only on Korean accomplishments, but the presumption that the as the world's sole remaining superpower the United States wants to control everything and "needs" Korea. Coupled with the heady nationalism embodied in the "Red Devil" supporters of Korea's national soccer team during Korea's successful hosting of the World Cup, and what may prove to have been an miscalculation of the depth and intensity of U.S. interest in the Peninsula, this newfound confidence appears to have fundamentally altered South Korea's approach to the U.S. The Roh Mu Hyun approach to the alliance was no longer simple alliance maintenance based on South Korean security concerns, but rather a reflection of a desire for a transformed relationship based on Korean confidence and assumptions about U.S. interests.

³ A moniker used to describe the generation in Korea that were at the time in their 30s, went to college in the 80s, were born in the 60s and cut their teeth on Pentium 386 computers.

The unfortunate irony is that during the same period of time, it is arguable that United States interest in Korea has declined. Korea is often referred to as the last bastion of the Cold War, but the Cold War is indeed over and the global interests that drove U.S. involvement on the Peninsula during the Cold War are fundamentally transformed. Secondly, in a post 9-11 environment the attention paid by the United States to Asia as a whole has diminished with our focus on the War on Terror and the Middle East. On the security front, with the U.S. ability to make bombing runs from Missouri to Kosovo and back, the pre-eminence of proximity is inevitably challenged. Furthermore, the considerable strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance in recent years has certainly impacted views in Washington of the comparative importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

This is not to say that the alliance is not important, but that there are again divergent trend lines. With Korea more confident and less insecure than ever before, and the U.S. increasingly distracted and perhaps disinterested, conditions are ripe for alliance maintenance issues that would normally be manageable to cause real damage to the relationship.

•Political Frictions

Much of the concern over political relations between the U.S. and the ROK has been exacerbated by the poor quality of the political discourse between Washington and Seoul, which is deemed hardly appropriate for two long-term allies. In recent months it seems that almost every utterance coming out of the Blue House further undermines perceptions of South Korean support for the alliance. President Roh Mu Hyun has always been an independent voice, expressing some understanding for the North Korean pursuit of nuclear weapons and categorically ruling out the use of force on the Peninsula in a November 12, 2004, speech in Los Angeles, shortly before meeting President Bush at an APEC meeting. That speech was followed by a trip to Europe during which he criticized his political opponents in Seoul as being “more American than the Americans.” The North Korean missile test in July has proven to be another area of divergence. Following the launch, the Roh administration openly criticized the draft Japanese resolution at the UN and expressed its support for a Chinese alternative, which even the Chinese ultimately abandoned. When Roh’s National Security Advisor told the Korean National Assembly Member Lee Jong Seok that the U.S. had “failed the most” in not stopping the North Korean missile test, President Roh responded to the opposition lawmaker’s criticism by lauding Mr. Lee’s comments and saying he wanted all of his ministers to “speak the truth” even in the face of U.S. policy—something to be anticipated in internal sessions, but not in public. Such issues cannot of course be divorced from the complexities of Korea-Japan relations in an era of closer than ever U.S.-Japan relations. President Roh’s decision, while downplaying the North Korean missile test, to go ballistic in response to the declaration of Japanese political leaders that they had a right to consider a preemptive strike in response to the same missile tests certainly raised eyebrows in Washington.

•Emergence of Non-traditional Issues

For the better part of fifty years the U.S. approach towards North Korea was defined entirely by deterrence. While we assumed the worst about North Korea's human rights record and its illicit activities, since the U.S. had no interaction with North Korea, such issues did not factor into the relationship. A decade of minimal engagement in the 1990s, however, opened the door, and in recent years three very important non-traditional issues have been gaining considerable traction on U.S. perceptions of and interaction with North Korea: human rights, illicit activities and the Japanese kidnapping cases. With greater contact with North Korea have come greater information flows and there are now sizable and growing interest groups paying particular attention to these non-traditional issues. The North Korea Freedom Coalition and other organizations sponsor an annual North Korea Freedom Week in Washington D.C. and have cultivated growing interest in the issue of North Korean human rights on Capitol Hill. The War on Terror has cast a new light on the international trade in weapons of mass destruction and weaknesses in the international financial system that might be exploited by terrorists. Armed with new tools, the U.S. Treasury Department has begun to pay particularly close attention to North Korea's counterfeiting and smuggling activities and Pyongyang is also firmly in the sights of the Proliferation Security Initiative. Finally, the failure of Prime Minister Koizumi's attempt to solve the issue of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea has focused attention on an issue that is often linked in the U.S. with questions of human rights and which will almost certainly get more play under its chief champion, the newly elected Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

The emergence of these issues becomes an issue in the alliance insomuch as the U.S. response has been so much at odds with the South Korean policy of engagement and its predilection to place a lower priority on these issues as it attempt to reduce tensions on the Peninsula. This contrasting approach has had a particular impact on congressional views of South Korea, for example when over 30 South Korean National Assembly members from the Woori Party wrote a letter denouncing the passage of the North Korean Freedom Act in November of 2004. Given the emotional nature of all of these issues it is not difficult to see why charges of "appeasement" have been so readily leveled against Seoul. In its effort to head off what it perceives to be negative pressure on the North, the South has been seen as acting as North Korea's lawyer. Given North Korea's pariah status and the rapidly declining political space in Washington for proactively engaging North Korea, South Korea's advocacy has not won it any friends in Washington.

•Implications of the Emerging Sino-Japan Rivalry

While polls show that most South Koreans are deeply ambivalent about the rise of China and even alarmed at the growing Chinese influence in North Korea, there is a growing if inaccurate perception in Washington that South Korea is reverting to more historical cultural orbit around China. This view has been furthered by Korea's cooperation with China in its attempts to resist pressure on North Korea, and by the sharp decline in Korea-Japan relations that has closely matched rising tensions in China-Japan relations. Coming as it has in the context of closer then ever U.S.-Japan ties, such trends have clearly affected U.S. perceptions of Korea

IV. Conclusions

•The ROK needs to make own sovereign strategic decision on the alliance

It is possible to make a strong case in that in East Asia today, the only countries that have been able to maintain strong alliances with the United States are Japan, Singapore and Australia. These are arguably all countries that independently assessed their own strategic interests, decided that a strong alliance with the United States was in that interest, and as a result have “courted” the U.S. This marks a sharp contrast with the Cold War era which placed the initiative in the hands of the U.S. With Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and the global war on terror demanding most of the United States’ attention, good intentions aside, Asia continues to get short shrift.

It is in this context that Korea needs to conduct a fundamental evaluation of its national interest, particularly given its position between a rising China and a potentially resurgent Japan and make its own strategic decision as to whether it wants to not just maintain, but strengthen its relationship with the U.S. This is a decision that must of a necessity look beyond the current crisis with North Korea, since such short-term concerns seem likely to have much longer term implications for a post-unification Korea and its relations with the U.S. and the region. Koreans may have smirked when former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi during his last visit to the U.S. channeled Elvis to express his approach to the U.S.: “I love you, I need you, I want you.” However, whether Koreans believe it or not, the U.S., particularly in the post-Cold War era, will not long remain in a country where it is not wanted.

This is not just a message for President Roh and the ruling party. While there is still considerable time before the November 2007 presidential elections in Korea, there is some expectation that with the current unpopularity of Roh and near collapse of the Woori Party, the next government will be conservative. However, if recent events are any indication, even the conservative opposition party does not fully grasp the nature of the transformation in U.S. views. In the current era, it will likely not be sufficient to express support for past structures and perceived U.S. wants. Instead, Korea will, like Japan, Singapore and Australia, need to articulate why it wants the U.S. to stay, why it is in Korea’s interest, and more importantly, why the U.S. presence is in the U.S. interest. In short, they will need to “court” a distracted and distant America.

•U.S. needs to assess the U.S.-ROK alliance in a regional context

The United States’ interests are not served by evaluating the U.S.-ROK alliance from solely a broad global (GPR) perspective. Nor are they served by viewing the alliance solely in the context of the Korean Peninsula. Instead, the U.S.-ROK alliance should be seen squarely in the context of U.S interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Even while recognizing the primacy of the U.S.-Japan alliance and the unprecedented close U.S.-Japan political relations; it is a folly to view the U.S.-Korea and the U.S.-Japan alliances as truly separate. At a minimum they are deeply symbiotic. The best support for a strong U.S.-Japan alliance is a strong U.S.-Korea alliance. Not only does the U.S.-Korea alliance provide the fig leaf for public support in Japan, but perhaps more importantly, given Japan's difficult relations with China, it is the U.S.-Korea alliance that keeps the U.S.-Japan alliance from being primarily framed in the context of the rise of China.

The U.S. also needs to look beyond the short-term emotional issues currently challenging the alliance and undermining its perception of South Korea as a trustworthy alliance partner. This means not just looking beyond the current administration in Seoul, but even beyond the resolution of the current crisis with North Korea. For the sake of both Korean and U.S. interests in the region, the value of the U.S.-Korean alliance should be viewed not just in the context of the Korean Peninsula, but how it is viewed by China, and by other U.S. allies in the region. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Peninsula, or even a significant reduction would doubtless be interpreted in the region as evidence of declining U.S. commitment. To once again borrow from the works of Mike Mansfield, "We must not forget our future lies in large part, in the Pacific."